



Revolutionary leader Khamenei at a parade: *No one can escape the silent war.*

## A Daughter's Rebellion

***Islamic hardliners and reformists are fighting for power in Iran. In the middle of this dispute, an artist living in Frankfurt wants to clear up the political assassinations of her parents.***

*by Ralf Hoppe*

As the woman steps out of the dervish house in the afternoon, exhausted, wrapped in a black chador and escorted by two dozen vigilant men, she knows that there will be difficulties. However, she doesn't know that in a moment she will have to run for her life.

The woman's name is Parastou Forouhar. She has two addresses. The first: Buchwaldstraße 45, Frankfurt-Bornheim, on the third floor of a quiet rented house. Her boyfriend Thorsten and her two sons are sitting there getting worried.

Her second address: Sadeh-Street 22. The road branches off from the loud six lanes of Hedajat-Street; it is an everyday area for ordinary people and there is a tailor's workshop on the corner. Number 22 is one of the biggest houses in the neighbourhood, and it is here that Parastou Forouhar grew up as the beloved child of a lawyer and his wife. Her parents were assassinated in this house four years ago, and that was the day that changed her life. That is also the reason for her being here again today, back from Germany, in the middle of Tehran, capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in the middle of a secret civil war.

Some 400 party affiliates, friends of her deceased parents and opponents of the regime were in the Dervish house during the commemorative ceremony. Four speeches were given and poems were read out in-between, people sat on plastic chairs underneath the obligatory huge portraits of the revolutionary leaders Khomeini and Khamenei and squinted at the chandeliers.

The speeches were expressive: Persian, with its ringing vowels and lilting chanting, is a language of grand emotions. Some visitors use their phones as microphones; others were listening to every word in Tabriz, Hamadan,

and Isfahan amongst other cities. And the loudspeakers on the courtyard walls of the dervish house broadcast every reverberating, crackling word to the outside world.

Some 500 visitors are still standing in the courtyard and 4000 people are crowded into the surrounding streets. The young, the old, and students are amongst their numbers, mothers and dentists, cooks and taxi drivers, some have tears in their eyes, many are singing songs with the word “*Asadi*” in them: freedom. Pieces of leaflets are being thrown high into the air and are fluttering to the ground whilst people are hurriedly bending down after them, others are holding up photos of Parastou Forouhar’s parents. This on its own is illegal: the photos are old and the symbol of the Islamic Republic is missing from the flags in the background. Choruses of voices shout in unison: “*Sendani-je sijasi asad bajad gardad*” – Freedom for the political prisoners!



Image Caption: Oppositionist Forouhar in front of the picture of her father (in her parents’ house in Tehran) – *The museum of murder*

Men are standing on the surrounding rooftops looking through video cameras and compiling the faces below: they are secret service agents.

Now strange men are pushing themselves into the crowd, most of them on foot, some in pairs on mopeds: they are all noticeably broad-shouldered with large unshaven faces and are carrying crowbars and wooden truncheons under their arms, ineptly disguised by newspapers. They are members of *Ansar-e Hesbollah*, the supporters of the party of God, a party that is faithful to the regime. They call themselves the “speaking Quran”. They are notorious.

For the past four years, Parastou Forouhar has defied what is about to happen. This is because she hosts the memorial service every year. This is because she gave interviews to Tehran’s daily newspapers before they were forbidden. This is because she has shown the murders to be what they were: political.

Dusk descends. Decorative lighting illuminates Hedajat-Street in pools of neon; red, green and white glimmer.

For the past four years, Parastou Forouhar has feared what is about to happen, but her defiance has always been stronger than her fear.

Early in the morning, before the memorial rally, Parastou Forouhar went to the wholesale flower market and bought more than seventy dollars worth of forsythia, white carnations and red roses – a whole cartload of flowers for her parents’ house. She moved vases, lit tea lights and spread out the bouquets and little candles all over the house: in the yard in front of the rusted garden swing where her father’s car used to be parked; in the lounge where photos and paintings hang; in her father’s study where his armchair is still in the same position that the murderers left it in, pointing towards Mecca. On the carpet underneath a very old beige-red Tabriz rug, a bloodstain can still be seen, covered by a piece of Plexiglas. Her father’s walking stick is leaning against the chair: the knob is silver

with a small, engraved flower motif.

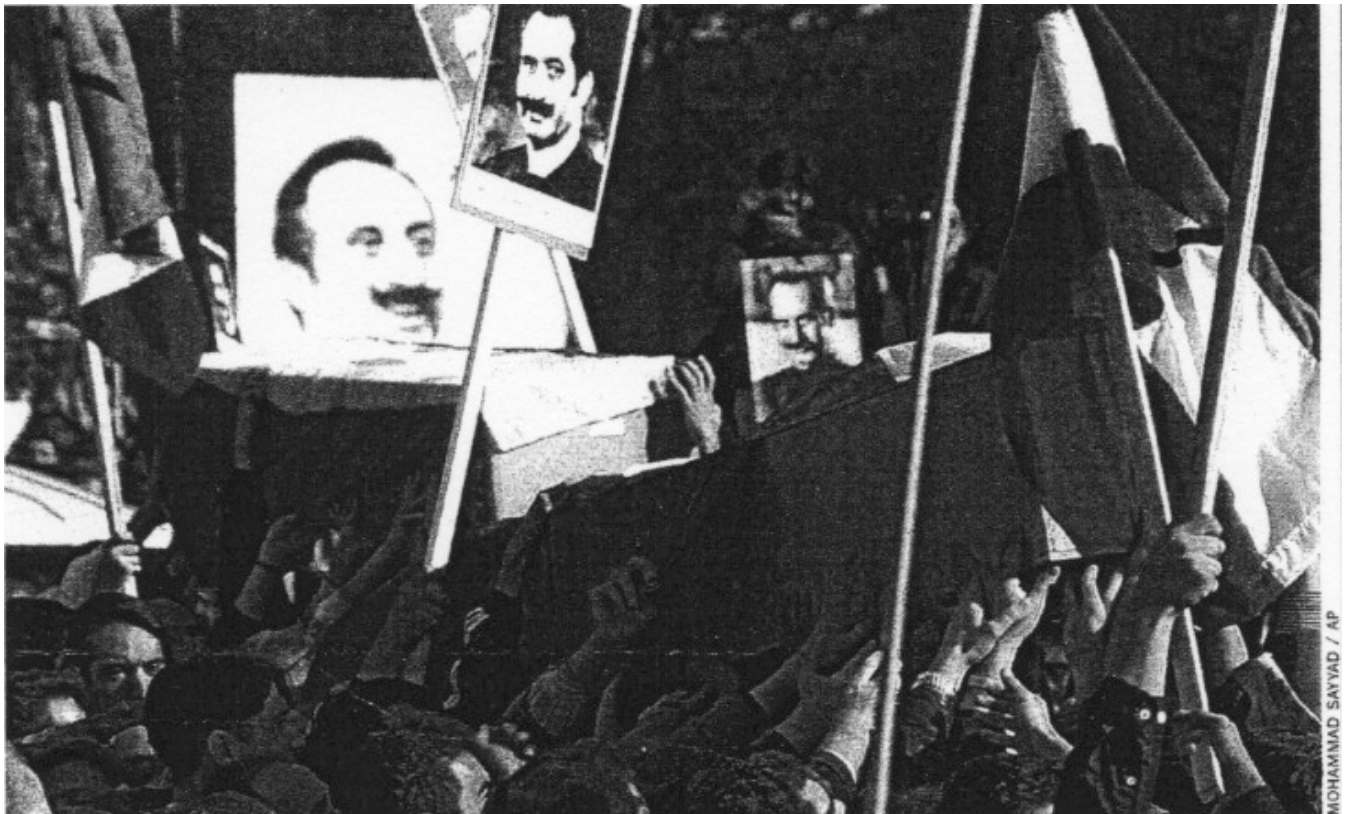
Room by room, bouquet by bouquet, the daughter decorates her parents' house, making it into a museum of murder.

It is her 13<sup>th</sup> visit since her parents' death, but this one is special. This week she has done nothing but run from one departmental office to the next. She has, as so often before, submitted applications, filled out forms, spoken to the Chief of Police, and she has done it: an official memorial service has been permitted to take place in the dervish house in the afternoon and now, in the morning, a private ceremony can be held in her parents' house.

The intercom buzzes perpetually. New visitors constantly come into the garden of the murder house. Parastou Forouhar shakes hands, exchanges kisses and hugs. She greets students, professors and party officials, all friends and associates of her parents. More than 70 people are soon sitting in the lounge. No tea is being served because of the fasting month of Ramadan, but the guests chat away in low voices, recounting tales of new arrests. Six students. But three of them should have been released. Supposedly. Some visitors prefer to write down what they want to say on scraps of paper, as one can never know if the house is in fact bugged.

Four years earlier, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November 1998, the intercom buzzed shortly after 9pm. The head of the household, Dariush Forouhar, 69 years old, asked what was going on. They were policemen, said the men standing before the door. His car had been involved in an accident and they had to check for damage, they said. The daughter knows this from information in the investigation files. Dariush Forouhar must have been puzzled, as his car was in the yard unscathed.

Nevertheless he let both of the late guests in. They had torches and used them to inspect the car. Forouhar didn't notice that one of supposed police officers opened the door; ten other murderers then slipped into the house. Six kept watch outside. Forouhar's wife, nine years younger than he was, was already in bed by this point, she was feverish, coughing and had come down with the flu. There was a small tube of vitamin tablets next to the bed. The twelve men were carrying long knives; they were acting on behalf of Allah, the Gracious, the Almighty. It was shortly after the new moon.



Memorial parade for the murdered married Forouhar couple (1998): *Coffins are the answer*

That evening Parastou Forouhar was sitting in Offenbach, where she then lived, watching television and waiting for a call from her parents. Both of her boys were asleep. "Einer wird gewinnen" (*Only one will win*) with Jörg Kachelmann was on the TV – the telephone didn't ring. "Wort zum Sonntag" (*Word for Sunday*) at 10:35pm was hosted by Bärbel Deifel-Vogelmann. In Tehran it was far past midnight by this time. Parastou Forouhar went to bed without watching the late-night film and without having spoken to her parents one last time.

The next afternoon she learned that her father had bled to death in the armchair in his study, stabbed 12 times in his throat, chest and stomach. The rug under the armchair was soaked through with blood and completely twisted. The

heavy chair had been turned so that the deceased's face was facing the wall: pointing towards Mecca. The deceased was a former ally of Ayatollah Khomeini and the former Labour Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran; furthermore, he was the leader of the "Hesb-e Mellat-e Iran" party, a kind of Iranian SPD (*Social Democratic Party of Germany*). He had fought for the Islamic Revolution, and since then he had been seen as one of the most high-profile critics of the regime.

He had also lived by one principle his whole life: never show fear.

Parvaneh Forouhar, his wife, died from 24 stab wounds. The duvet lay in tatters and had been pulled up over her face, whilst the vitamin tablets swam in blood.

The murder of the Forouhars was one of many attempts by the regime to intimidate its critics. With success. A threatening silence reigned over the following four years in Iran.

Parastou Forouhar has been living two lives since that night. In Tehran she is an accuser, in Germany she is an artist. In her native land she is fighting for justice, in her second homeland she is creating art, art that gives her the strength to carry on her fight.

Parastou Forouhar is a warm-hearted person, rather cheerful, in actuality too soft for her opponents. Every time she talks about her parents' murder, tears well up in her eyes and she makes an effort not to cry. She has gotten used to living under this strain. She has found a way to transform her grief into toughness.

And into poetry. She painted the walls of a museum in Bonn with Persian characters and filled the room with several hundred inscribed tennis balls, inscriptions that included thoughts, wishes and dreams that bounced and collided, tick tock, across the room. In the past year she took part in the Berlin Biennial with huge photos for which she clothed men in black shrouds. In October of this year, the pictures should have been displayed in the Golestan gallery, one of the most important galleries in Tehran. Then came the anonymous phone call: you will regret it. The opening of the exhibition took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October. It was well visited, but there were only empty frames hanging on the walls. Parastou had locked away the photos, but in spite of this half of all the works were sold on the first day. Tehranis buy pictures because they are not allowed to view them.

### ***"After 23 years of the Islamic Republic, everyone has a score to settle"***

The atmosphere in the country was changing, you could feel it in the air, and then something happened that filled Parastou Forouhar with new courage: the protests against the sentencing of history professor Haschem Aghadschahi for saying that people were not monkeys that had to imitate the mullahs.

The academic was sentenced to death for blasphemy and insulting the prophets. Furthermore, the verdict included 74 lashes, an employment ban and banishment from the province.

Students protested, collected signatures and all this culminated in brawls on the Tehran campus. The verdict was declared as not being legally binding and an appeal was submitted, as if Iran were a constitutional state. The regime yielded, a signal to everyone to fight for their rights.

"After 23 years of the Islamic Republic", says a surgeon taking part at the Forouhar's memorial service, "after so many assassinations, employment bans and arrests, almost everyone has a score to settle: with a mullah, with someone from the police, with the judiciary."

Life is better than ever for the clerics with their earthly pleasures of gold and luxury, and countless jokes about the Mercedes-mullahs circulate in Tehran. They have however grasped that they should bestow money and influence upon other societal groups. The bazaar for example, the traditional trader caste, supports the regime for the most part. Or the impoverished families to the south of Tehran who can boast a martyr amongst their relatives – they sometimes receive money from the government, sometimes provisions, sometimes a flat.

Perhaps 20 per cent of Iranians profit from the system, and, in turn, support it, estimates the surgeon. The others curse it to hell.

There is hardly ever a meeting of Tehranis where the question doesn't raise its mistrusted head: which side are you on? The Iranians, especially the middle and upper classes, are markedly polite and refined; but they are concealing fear and suspicion underneath. Every film that gets made, every Friday prayer, every banned newspaper – everything is scrutinised for symbolism and double meanings.

Nobody can escape the silent war. Not even the dead.

This Friday, whilst Parastou Forouhar is greeting her guests and sorting the leaflets one last time, on this holiday, the Islamic Sunday, the opposition is mobilising their dead. More than 20 army flatbed trucks have been crawling through the city since the early morning. They have rumbled across Eslamboli-Avenue, driven down Dr.-Beheshti-Avenue, and taken Fatemi Avenue to Enghelab, the street of the Revolution. Their destination: the main entrance of Tehran University. Their cargo: 300 coffins.

Within them – supposedly – are the remains of the unknown soldiers from the Iraq War that lasted until 1988.

Quite why the corpses are only being buried now, 14 years later, isn't a question being asked, as there isn't an answer on offer. What matters is the symbolism. The regime is sending coffins as a response to the student protests.

Today the Friday prayer on campus is being said by a revolutionary leader.

This man has been chosen by the so-called council of experts, which is made up of 80 theologians; this man is the direct successor of Khomeini, the state founder; his judgements are irrefutable; this man is wearing the black turban that marks him out as a descendant of the prophet, with more power than the President, the Council of Ministers and the Parliament put together: Ayatollah Khamenei. The fact that he is personally making an appearance today is a message from the regime and it says: this far and no further. Look, we are mobilising the martyrs and the dead against the insubordinates, and we are shutting you up in the place where you rebelled: at the university.

The second message is as follows: the military is faithful to the clergy. Army helicopters in camouflage colours are hovering menacingly low over the campus. Every single one of the 300 coffins is adorned with the national flag, green, white and red, and soldiers dressed in white with bucket top boots and measured gazes are standing on the flatbed trucks. The vehicles are decorated with ivy and red carnations. People have clambered over the blockade and are pushing towards the coffins to touch them, to kiss them, they are hysterical.

Buses have been carting believers from the impoverished southern districts since the early morning, more than 20,000 people. Men are checking them with metal detectors, religious police with Kalashnikovs are standing around and undercover policemen are searching and x-raying every bag. Men and woman are being channelled into separate areas.

Khamenei is speaking out from a preacher's pulpit beneath a picture of Khomeini. He is speaking calmly, his voice sounds warm, though the content of his speech is icy. He lashes out at the USA's delusions of grandeur, the scheming of the godless enemy who Iran should destabilise – and he throws out a warning to the critics of the regime: whoever accuses the Islamic system of despotism, whoever pushes the cause for peace and human rights, is either an enemy or being directed by the enemy.

A warning, threateningly delivered over loudspeaker batteries, the kind that are known in the west from Stones concerts. Absolute silence reigns over the campus for the next few moments. And then the thousands of people in attendance bow down, all on their knees with their faces directed towards Mecca; they murmur the holy words and press their foreheads to the ground before Allah's earthly delegate.

A little after 2pm, after the private ceremony, the memorial parade has left the Forouhar's house with the daughter at the head. They've gone over Hedajat-Street, crossed over Baharestan-Square; the chanegah, the dervishes' clubhouse is situated behind.

Increasing numbers of people join the ranks of the parade as it makes away through the streets, passers-by, strangers, so that by the time they reach Safi-Ali Shah-Street in front of the dervish house, over a thousand people fill the narrow street. The event is getting out of control and the police are getting nervous. They have pulled out their heavy rubber truncheons, their officers are barking orders: they should disperse the crowd, but how? The choruses of voices go on singing: freedom for the political prisoners, and: Forouhar, Forouhar, we will go your way!

Four speeches are given and Parastou Forouhar steps up to the microphone last. She describes her search for justice, her struggle to uncover the truth and the acts of deceptions carried out by the legal system. She has written over 100 letters, visited prosecutors and judges over 70 times, she has engaged the services of three lawyers and one is sitting in prison because of the case, sentenced to 50 lashes.

The proceedings against the 18 culprits took place two years ago and were a farce in her eyes. Papers from the files went missing and one of the accused apparently committed suicide by drinking depilatories before the beginning of the proceedings. The perpetrators accused of carrying out the murders spoke of mysterious "bosses", whose identities were never made known.

Parastou Forouhar names names that afternoon in the dervishes' house. She speaks of the *Wasiran-e etelaat*, the Minister of Information—in other words, the head of the secret service. At the time of her parents' murder, a certain Mullah Ghorban-Ali Dorri Nadschafabadi was in charge; before it was Ali Fallahian who was well known as one of the alleged masterminds behind the "Mykonos" assassinations in Berlin.

Parastou Forouhar gives a eulogy that is a political statement at the same time. Her appearance is a risk – for her and for those listening to her. Those arrested in Tehran are thrown into a system of despotism. The threat of Evin-Prison, carved into the mountain range to the north of the city, and already notorious from the time of the Shah, looms large over Tehran.

Yet Parastou Forouhar and those who came today, and many others of the so-called Reformists – they dare to take this risk.

### ***"1979, this was our Revolution – the Mullahs stole it from us"***

They are doing these things, says Parastou Forouhar, because they stole the Revolution from us. Because the 1979 Revolution and the overthrow of the Shah, who was in thrall to America, was our struggle. My father sat in prison often enough because he was an enemy of the Shah; sometimes I was allowed to visit him accompanied by my mother. And when I asked my father why he wasn't allowed to come home, he said that he unfortunately had to stay here because it was all about freedom.

Forouhar was a good friend of Khomeini's. In the months before the Revolution, Mullahs were guests at his home in Sadeh-Lane almost daily. Matters were discussed. Everyone was polite. Alliances were forged. The intellectuals and the pious.

Parastou Forouhar, just turned 16, danced for days on end out in the street after the Shah had to flee. Together with her friends she gave out leaflets, demonstrated and put up posters, although there used to be a notorious secret service agent under the Shah: back then he was called Savak.

This is why disappointment was so much greater as the clergy and the bazaar left the public out in the cold following the successful Revolution. Despite the disappointment, the euphoric days following the Revolution left a residing memory: the regime can be overthrown. It is dangerous, but it is possible.

It is shortly after 4:30pm and the memorial procession has come to an end. Parastou Forouhar leaves the dervish house together with some friends of her parents. Thousands of people are still thronging outside on the street. Two dozen men surround Parastou Forouhar; they are supposed to bring her safely through the melee back to her house. It could be a triumphant procession; instead it is a disaster.

Allah's militia strikes.

The men from the Ansar-e Hesbollah party rip the packing material and newspaper from their crowbars and truncheons and start to beat their way through the crowd in 5, 10, 15, 20 places simultaneously. The men number maybe 300 or 400 and so are undoubtedly in the minority. But they are definitely better trained in what they are doing.

A crowbar with a weight of perhaps two or three kilograms and a length of about 70 centimetres is a horrific weapon.

The crowd panics, bones are broken, and old women fall to the ground. Glasses fly off faces and are stamped on as the dust from the street rises. Mothers scream for their children who have gotten lost in the chaos. Some of the thugs have come on mopeds and the riders careen into the crowd. The pillion passengers hit out wildly into the crush of the screaming, whimpering, heaving, fleeing masses. Before a couple of brave souls have a chance to overpower the attackers, the thugs jump onto their mopeds and speed off. Some of the truncheon bearers hunt out specific individuals, some photographers. The hunted run through the labyrinth of streets and stumble inadvertently into cul-de-sacs; whoever gets caught here is beaten.

The memorial ceremony has become a part of the growing struggles for power in Iran. It is a war between the clerical reformists and the clerical authorities. A war between the civilians and the mullahs. The intellectuals against the bazaar. The students against the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution and their paramilitary, the Basij. New frontlines are established every day.

The attack on the Forouhars' congregation was ordered and well prepared. Is it to punish the protestors? Is it to spread fear? Or do the Hesbollah men want to get to Parastou Forouhar?

This appears to be the case. She runs for her life. Her father's party associates form a cordon around her and in this way she makes it home, half blinded from a squirt of tear gas that hit her – this is how close the thugs were to getting to her. Strong Hossein Schahoweissi, a mechanical engineer from Aachen in his late 50s and a friend of hers, is bleeding from deep head wounds. A truncheon blow has smashed in his nose. He threw himself over Parastou Forouhar to protect her at the very last moment.

State-owned television keeps the backgrounds to the fighting secret and official figures relating to the numbers of injured are not given. It must however number in the hundreds.

The silent war in Iran does not get much attention in the west, as it is not media friendly. These mullahs all look the same, no one can tell them apart. If the Shah's son were to come back from exile, then at the very least the return of the prince would make a good story, but this?

The turmoil will eventually be subdued and will also break out again at some point. The Islamic powers-that-be are in a fix: as soon as they permit political freedom, as the relatively powerless President Khatami demands, then they will set events in motion that they will not be able to control. And if they deny freedom, then the pressure will increase. They know the rules of the game, for it wasn't so long ago that they were the revolutionaries. All that is left to them is this: intimidation.

Two weeks after the memorial service, Parastou Forouhar wants to fly to Frankfurt. Officials at Mehrabad airport however do not want to let her through and they take away her passport – she is only allowed to fly out two exhausting days later: one last warning.

Will she ever fly back to Iran again? "Of course", she says on the phone, "soon, why ever not?"

She laughs and it sounds odd, as if she was crying.